

Northern Film School, UK.

The importance of the personal narrative in research: Overview of school research examples and CINAGE case study.

Hello everyone, Thank you for inviting me to present.

In preparing this presentation I thought it worth while to give an overview of the Northern Film School, UK, which is run within the school of film, music and performing arts at Leeds Beckett University. The school has run an MA program for over Thirty years, and the Undergraduate program for 15 years. The Northern film school currently consists of over four hundred students with 15 full-time and 40 part time visiting lecturers.

The school has a history in drama production and a developing reputation within documentary production and experimental film. The staff within the school support film production within specialisms as a primary role, but of course these roles are situated in a wider creative social infrastructure of the creative arts. As a school we are engaged in asking the questions, why do we make films and what type of stories are we interested in telling? And of course we are interested in how our research activities tie in with that.

This presentation is tentatively titled ...**The importance of the personal narrative in research**... it is a useful and important theme that has been explored by participants that have been involved with the CINAGE project that I'm going to introduce. I thought that this term, **The importance of the personal narrative in research** was a useful way to link the CINAGE project to the theme of this session *Uses of Research*, particularly in the context of research that is happening in film schools that value storytelling as a central common ground.

Defining the environment in which research happens is a useful thing to consider. Increasingly the importance of building a research environment that can be viewed and measured in some form is becoming a major aspect of research within the UK University system and I'm sure within Europe also. The culture of a creative film school is a fertile ground for research of all kinds to flourish. Within the Northern Film School there is a strong willingness to develop the relationship between research and film making practice, to keep the practice of filmmaking at the heart of research.

There has been a range of research activity by staff at the Northern film School aimed at considering the *personal narrative* as a driving force in storytelling within film, within research and within crossover areas of film to fine art.

For example both my own Doctoral research thesis, *Story, Narrative, Material* and Dr Ann Tobin's *Life's Blood: The Writer, the Practice and the Pedagogy of*

Screenwriting (Tobin, 2015) utilize the personal narrative as a tool of research. It is worth mentioning that Dr Tobin completed her Doctorate when she was over 65, and although I am a little bit younger we shared similar themes relating to personal narratives as a method of conducting research through practice.

For my own research, my personal history of family and adoption are firmly routed in my practice as a filmmaker and contemporary artist.

For Dr Ann Tobin, already an experienced scriptwriter and story developer the development of a feature length screenplay formed the basis of her practice led Phd. This screenplay, based around a fictionalized account of early life experiences set within the political infrastructure of the UK Labour party was the driving force of her reflexive analysis of teaching screenwriting. Both these positions are situated within the context of practice based Doctorate research.

The nature of research activity within the school although represented in traditional research papers, Journal articles, books etc. is also concerned to place the activity of research firmly within the practice of filmmaking. Framing research as practice has been an ambition in the research culture of the School. A study undertaken by the School Director Larra Anderson in collaboration with Dr Ann Tobin, *How do you do a practice-based Phd in filmmaking?* (Anderson, L, Tobin, A, 2012) contextualized the environment of a filmmaking research culture within the UK University system. Presented at the *Avanca-Cinema* conference, the paper details a research strategy that engages the activity of filmmaking practice as the core research methodology. This study helps to support the argument that the context of the *personal narrative* can find a fertile home in the research culture of filmmaking both within a Doctoral environment and in the post Doctoral world of research.

The culture of the school also allows for and encourages the engagement with the creative messiness (in possible research terms) of how we might consider overlaps between filmmaking and contemporary art. Both myself and head of Cinematography Mark Carey contribute to this research dialogue in various ways. Both are engaged in this crossover practice. For example Mark Carey's work in collaboration with Artist Jasmina Cibic, (*For Our Economy and Culture* made for the Slovenian Pavilion of the 55th Venice Biennial and *Spielraum - The Nation Loves It*, (2015) are examples of the fertile crossover in both the creative practice of filmmaking and installation and developing the research language of this transdisciplinary approach.

Both myself and Dr Ann Tobin from the Northern film School have collaborated with Artist Dr Sarah Taylor, Head of Painting at the Leeds College of Art, UK. in forming a collaborative research interest concerning film, contemporary art and representation of class.

There is a shared interest between the three of us, as Dr Sarah Taylor also developed a practice based phd based on the personal narrative methodology and the relationship of class, painting and the importance of gender. Dr Taylor developed the research symposium *Classification: Artists & Thinkers*

Consider the Importance of Discussing Class (Leeds college of Art, 2013) which included debates on the nature of the personal narrative, lived experience and the creative artifact.

The importance of considering the *personal narrative* in the widest framework within research and film research in particular has been one of many strategies employed within the research of the Northern Film School. There are as you would imagine many other areas of research activity which take a different approach and adopt different research methodologies. The *personal narrative* has however proved to be a useful one in developing larger and more complex research projects. The expertise it generates has allowed the school scope in supporting the CINAGE research project.

Overview of the CINAGE Research project: A case study

Jennifer Granville and Dr Ann Tobin of the Northern Film School, and Dr Mark Robinson of the School of Health and Wellbeing at Leeds Beckett university received funding from Europe's lifelong learning programme, Grundvig, for a two year project entitled CINAGE, which saw them work alongside researchers in Portugal, Italy and Slovenia, exploring the EU's recommendations for healthy, active ageing to see whether or not the needs and concerns of older people are reflected in contemporary cinema.

A focus group of over-60s was invited to watch a broad range of European movies and to discuss their portrayal of age and ageing, and how senior people with real life problems are addressed through film.

Using the latest technology available at the Northern Film School, and working with students on the University's Filmmaking degrees, a team of volunteers from the focus groups then went on to attend practical filmmaking workshops, producing a series of three short films.

Phase One

The Northern Film School at Leeds Beckett University has contributed to the development and successful running of this European research project. The

project team has been led, and the project developed by Principle Lecturer Jenny Granville since the start of the project in 2013.

With funding from the European Commission The Northern Film School @ Leeds Beckett University along with partners in Portugal (AidLearn), Slovenia (University of the Third Age) and Italy (Association Study Centre,) City of Foligno) came together to form CINAGE, European Cinema for Active Ageing.

A Gruntvig multilateral project CINAGE aims to offer exciting later life learning opportunities to senior learners from diverse communities and to engage those individuals with critical analysis of European Cinema and practical filmmaking.

Structure, length and learning objectives

Phase one of the project extensively based in research was completed by the four partner countries in April 2014. At Leeds Beckett University Dr Nick Robinson from the faculty of Health and Social Sciences compiled a wide-ranging report concerned with researching country AND region ,competencies AND factors such as life expectancy, demographical context, learning preferences, civic and community issues etc. In each partner country volunteer groups were selected. In the Northern Film School Six volunteers over the age of 65 were recruited. Each partner country analysed their own individual national situations on active ageing, as well as reviewing active ageing topics dealt with in European films.

Six areas or **competencies** for active ageing were agreed on. Three of which as a film school we were most concerned with.

These were

Learning

This concerns opportunities to take part in learning in older age, including self-directed learning, opportunities to update or develop skills, creative learning opportunities, and training in new technologies.

Civic and community

Health

Emotional

This concerns maintaining autonomy and dignity in older age, and also providing and receiving meaningful social and emotional connections, care and support, at home and in the community.

Financial/Economic

Technological

This concerns access to and use of technology, including computers, mobile phones and apps - for social networking, e-communication, elearning.

With competencies for active ageing agreed, the 4 focus groups formed
...critically, analysed 12 selected European feature films.

More than 25 representatives from across the project's target audience watched the films, they met face-to-face to discuss which of those best represented one or more of the active ageing competencies and, finally, agreed on the following six most illustrative ones:

These were:

- **Before Twilight** 2009 - Jacek Blawut (Poland)
- **The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel** 2012 - John Madden (UK)
- **Mid-August Lunch** 2008 - Gianni Di Gregorio (Italy)
- **Good to Go** 2012 - Matevz Luzar (Slovenia)
- **Empties** 2007 - Jan Sverak (Czech Republic)
- **Vidange Pedue** 2006 – Geoffrey Enthoven

Phase Two: The Main activities of the Northern film school

For phase two of the project, both the original volunteer group and new volunteers were recruited via a range of methods, such as regional TV, radio, press, age support groups. Etc, The project was popular, not because it allowed discussion about cinema and aging, but because it had a practical

film making outcome. When subsequently questioned about why volunteers were interested in the project, it became clear very quickly that they all were very interested in making their own films.

The CINAGE project has described the activity like this:

The project enables older learners to shoot their own films about active ageing based on their self-reflection concerning the issues of old age and identification of adequate active ageing strategies.

The reflection on the experiences of real life and fiction, learning new things through them and sharing such experiences in small groups of peers, facilitates an understanding of how reality is influenced by past experiences, current perceptions and expectations about the future.

In the final Cinema Workshop all the knowledge and skills learned come together and participants will be able to be part of a film crew, in whatever capacity they choose. As three films will be produced during this stage, older learners will have the opportunity to test their abilities in more than one cinematic function. This is an interactive experience and participants are expected to engage in communicating with their peers with the aim of producing significant films. (CINAGE overview 2014).

Phase Two

Phase two of the **CINAGE** project is still ongoing (and well underway) with the remit of each partner delivering 3 short fiction films created by their volunteer groups. Commencing in November 2014 each partner country organised new pilot groups who completed the following modules:

- Filmmaking: Personal narratives, Screenwriting, Directing, Producing, Editing short-films.
- Cinema Workshop: 3 short movies in 30 hours!

Excitingly each partner country have almost finished the production of their three short narrative fiction films. All these films will be sent to us at the Northern Film school where we completing the final post-production and finishing.

The Northern Film School at Leeds Beckett University will host a final summit and festival in July 2015.

This will act as a showcasing event for the CINAGE package, the films created by all four partners, a film festival concerned with active ageing films

and narratives and a **summit** for the exploration of active ageing within cinema. The Festival will be the focal point of the dissemination of the films produced during the research project.

The importance of the festival in bringing together filmmakers from the project and beyond is crucial in helping to generate a wide ranging engagement with the issues of aging, storytelling, culture and to help identify the importance of the *personal narrative* within the wider scope of cinema.

The following are the synopsis of the films produced in the UK at the Northern Film School:

Swimming Pool - Narrative Fiction/Drama: Daisy a lady of some years and experience is at her favourite pool for her weekly swim. Surrounded by youth Daisy observes Sally an attractive younger women who has the attention of all the males in the pool. Though Daisy may not have the body of the younger Sally the two women have more in common than they think!
Director: (Age 71) / Writer (Age 86)

Trapped – Narrative Fiction /Comedy: Ray after a few days at his daughter's house is preparing to leave for home. Upon exiting the door things don't quite go to plan and a call of nature threatens to ruin Ray's day!
Director: (Age 72) / Writer: (Age 67)

Swan Song – Narrative Fiction/Drama: Instead of seeing out his final days in a grim hospital ward Henry takes control of his own end and destiny. After fond farewells and one final performance Ray departs for the next world on his beloved bicycle!
Director: (Age 86) / Writer (Age 73)

CILECT and CINAGE

The Northern Film School is in the process of contacting all CILECT European member film schools regarding the 'CINAGE' film festival in July 2015.

The Northern Film School is inviting European CILECT films school students to submit short dramas focusing on or containing:

- Aspects of ageing;
- Feature senior actors;
- Be produced by seniors in one or more head of department role.

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